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**U.S. Representative**

***John Spratt***

South Carolina ■ 5th District

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## **News Release**

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October 19, 2000, For Immediate Release

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### **Spratt Hails Passage of New Veterans Act**

***Bill increases education benefits, includes VA nurse pay raise measure; Change in Montgomery GI Bill “a big plus” Spratt says***

**WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. John Spratt (D-SC) today hailed Congressional approval of a bill that includes a 23% increase to the basic education readjustment benefit for veterans, effective November 1, 2000. The measure passed Congress this week and is awaiting the President’s signature.**

Spratt said the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) benefit will increase to \$650 per month for a three-year period of service and to \$528 per month for a two-year period of service.

The legislation, S.1402, the “Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act,” also includes a provision for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) nurse pay raises, and other personnel measures to recruit and retain skilled health care staff such as dentists and physicians assistants.

“This bill goes a long way toward revitalizing the education benefits America’s veterans earn through honorable military service,” said Spratt, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee. “It’s a big plus for our men and women who serve in uniform, and it will strengthen VA’s ability to care for veterans.”

Spratt is considered a leader in the fight for better veterans benefits. This year, he was honored by the South Carolina Disabled American Veterans with the “Veterans First Award.” In presenting the award, the group said of Spratt: “We appreciate your role as the Ranking Member of the House Budget Committee during the debate over funding for veterans health care. All veterans — and especially those in the 5th Congressional District — deeply appreciate your tireless efforts and constant contact during this crucial debate.”

Spratt said the VA nurse pay provision in the bill will give the Department of Veterans Affairs nurses the same annual pay raise other federal employees receive. Nurses are the largest part of the VA workforce, and have been the only VA health professionals who work without a definite annual comparability pay raise. This legislation provides VA nurses the same predictability of a pay raise that every other VA health professional enjoys.

The bill also allows VA hospital directors who face nursing staff shortages an opportunity to raise salaries so they can compete with other local health care facilities. “Today, competition for skilled health care personnel is fierce,” Spratt said.

Besides annual nurse pay increases, the legislation:

- addresses pay inequities faced by VA dentists;
- provides physicians’ assistants long-sought representation within VA headquarters along with better training opportunities; and
- helps VA retain social workers, pharmacists and medical support personnel.

“This bill corrects significant problems faced by the VA’s hard-working and devoted medical staff,” said Spratt. “Many nurses and other skilled professionals have devoted their careers to caring for our veterans, when they might have been able to make more money in the private sector. We need to take care of the people who take care of our veterans.”

The Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act allows VA to extend its buyout authority for two additional years, to allow VA to restructure its workforce by bringing in health care professionals and others with an appropriate mix of skills to contribute to the changing needs of the system.

The bill also mandates a follow-up survey of the status of the readjustment of Vietnam-era veterans advocated by veterans organizations. “It calls for a new focus on military service in assessing factors that may affect a veteran’s health,” Spratt said.

In addition, the bill provides for assistance to the Department of Defense as it tries to meet the demand for military funeral honors for veterans. The bill includes a provision that expressly requires employers to grant reservists an authorized leave of absence for performing funeral honors duty for veterans.

**H.R. 4864, “Veterans Claims Assistance Act.”** Also this week, the House passed and sent to the President H.R. 4864, “Veterans Claims Assistance Act.” The bill, supported by Spratt, authorizes the VA to assist claimants in gathering evidence to establish entitlement to a benefit, and requires the VA to make reasonable efforts to obtain records the claimant identifies and authorizes the VA to obtain. Under the bill, claimants no longer have to submit a “well-grounded” claim before the VA can help in gathering evidence.

For service-connected disability claims, the bill requires the VA to obtain service medical and treatment records at no cost to the claimant, and provide a medical exam if there is evidence a disability is service-related. The bill also permits veterans who had claims denied or dismissed to request a review of those claims within a two-year period.

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